



ISDC2014 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

ISBN: 978-967-0474-74-8

MODELS OF FAMILY THERAPY IN PRACTICE: SOCIAL WORKERS' PERSPECTIVE

Chan Cheong Chong*
*ccchan@uum.edu.my
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Abstract

Transgenerational, Structural, Strategic and Milan models are four popular models of family therapy. The application of these models in Asian families has been widely discussed by various practitioners and academic scholars. This paper investigates the application of models of family therapy in the Singapore context. Two social workers who have formal training and practices in family therapy were interviewed. The investigation focuses on the sequence of the family therapy sessions, cross-cultural issues, techniques and orientations used by the social workers. The interviews show that the Milan and Strategic models are two most dominant models in practicing family therapy. Besides that, Systemic theory has been found to be the most influential framework for both social workers in conducting family conferences.

Keywords: *family therapy, social work*

FAMILY THERAPY IN PRACTICE

Family therapy has been introduced in Singapore since 1981 (Toh, 2006). The development of family therapy in Singapore is closely related to the development of the counselling profession (Tan, 2003). However, those who are working with the families are normally social workers. Thus, it is commonly found that some Singaporean social workers receive formal training in family therapy in order to serve their clients especially families better.

Transgeneration, Structural, Strategic and Milan models are the common school of thoughts among the family therapies. These models have been widely used in Asian context. Transgeneration model is popular with its genogram approach for at least three generations in exploring the emotional process across the generations (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Structural Model clarifies roles, hierarchy and patterns in a family (Toh, 2006). Its directive approach is well accepted by Asian families because Asian clients are comfortable in taking instructions from someone with authority, the therapist (Walsh, 1995 in Palmer, 1999). The Strategic Model is closely related with the Milan model (Nicols & Schwartz, 2000). Both models focus on the sequences of family interaction and use specific techniques in the sessions. Strategic model is popular with its solution focused therapy, whereas Milan model is popular with its circular questioning (Toh, 2006). Solution focused therapy is a short-term goal driven approach which emphasizes on getting a solution rather than understanding the problem (Wong Oi Kau Stephanie, 1994). Circular questioning technique bridges the generation gaps between the seniors and the juniors in the Asian families by engaging every members of the family for feedback (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000; Nelson, Fleuridas & Rosenthal, 1986).

The four models are workable in the Asian context. However, some concepts of these models are incompatible to the Asian family values. For instance, concepts of differentiation (Transgeneration Model), enactment (Structural Model), compliment thru reframing (Strategic Model) and questioning across the members (Milan Model) challenge the patriarchy, authoritative and conservative values which are commonly found in Asian families. In laymen term, children are belonged to the society and they should behave according to

the societal expectation. Therefore, differentiation and enactment are difficult to be accepted. Furthermore, it is commonly known that compliment should not be easily given and children are not treated equally to their parents or senior members of the family. As a result, reframing and questioning techniques suggested from the models may not be useful in the Asian context. Hence, family therapists' or social work practitioners' experiences and views in working with the Asian families are crucial to be explored in searching the indigenous model of practice.

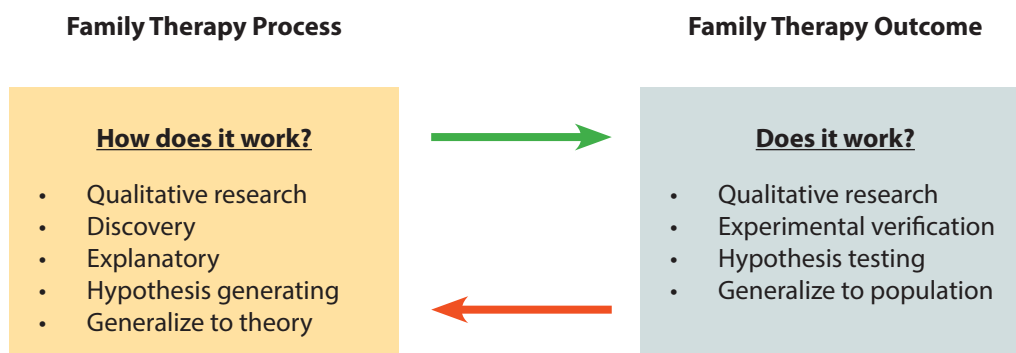
METHOD OF STUDY

Two social workers in Singapore who practice family therapy were interviewed. They have years of experiences in conducting family therapy. Ms. Chai¹ currently is an instructor in a university in Singapore. Before joining the university, she was the Centre Director of a NGO. She graduated with a Master's degree in Social Work, received additional training in family therapy and obtains a Diploma in Clinical Supervision.

Ms. Karen² obtains a Social Work degree and a Post Graduate Diploma in Family and Marital Therapy, certified by the Birkbeck College in London. She has started her career in social work by joining a NGO and in 2005, she was appointed as the Centre Director of the NGO.

According to Burck (2005, p. 239), qualitative method is suitable to investigate the process, while quantitative method is used to measure the outcome of the family therapy (Figure 1).

Figure 1- Capturing the process and outcome of family therapy.



Hence, interviews with Chai and Karen are in line with what was highlighted by Burck as discovering the process of how family therapists conduct the sessions. The findings of the interviews are presented following the sequence of the sessions, namely pre-session, first session, in between the sessions, intervention and termination. This idea is borrowed and modified from the structured family sessions in Classical Milan Interview Format (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000, p.250).

PRE-SESSION

Chai and Karen have gone through a similar process of preparation work in pre-session. For Karen, when she was a fresh social worker, she aggressively prepared herself by reading as much as information she can on the incoming family. However, she found that this was not helpful. At current, she would just need to focus only on simple but important information. Similarly, Chai did the same thing like Karen. She did not prepare too much because she tried not to pretend to know a lot about the family. However, she would formulate some hypotheses and uses it as a guideline in the first session.

Both of them use different strategies to get different family members to attend the session. For child or teenager who is reluctant to attend the session, Chai would put the responsibility on the parents. She believed that the parents were capable in making their children to join the session. Chai's strategy is not in line with Stanton and Health's (1995) comment that family therapist should not ask the family members to do the recruiting for other reluctant members to attend the session because this will not work. However, in reality, Chai's personal experience has shown that her approach did work very well for those absent children.

1) Pesudonym

2) Pesudonym

Karen adopts more systematic approach when dealing with the absenteeism of the family members in session. She first politely sent invitation to the family. If this is not work well then she might call up and speak directly to the person. If still not effective, she might just write in formally to the family. However, she explained that family therapy does not require all the family members to present. Therapist should not feel disappointed with the absence of any family member in the session. She perceived this situation as important clues about the current pattern of the family structure. She would then form some hypotheses based on these information.

FIRST SESSION

This is the most important session to comprehend Chai and Karen's preferences in conducting Family Therapy. When first meeting the family, both of them start the session by chatting with the members informally. For instance, both of them would ask family about how they manage to come to the centre or any difficulty in finding the location. Informal and non-threatening conversation is important to build up rapport with the family. Talking informally is also a way to help therapist to understand the dynamic of the family.

According to Chai and Karen, teenagers were the most reluctant family members in the session. The teenagers did not feel that they are the problem because they were mostly forced by their parents to attend the session. Chai and Karen accepted the resistant of the teenagers by giving them more space and time. According to Chai, although some teenagers showed resistant body gestures (e.g. close their eye, put their cap down), they were actually following what had been discussed in the session. Thus, Chai would try to engage the teenagers along the session by asking their responses. For those active teenagers, Karen would try to engage them first and at the same time let the parents observe their conversation. However, for those resistant teenagers, Karen would just have to wait for a suitable timing.

Different strategies were used by Chai and Karen when dealing with young children in the session. Toys, drawing papers and other tools should be provided in the counselling room. According to Chai, children in session could be very active or passive, but most of them were very curious on why they were there. Karen would start working with the parents before directly interact with the children. She explained that she had to empower the parents and show to the children that she respects their parents. Although, Karen did the same, she would ensure there were sufficient eye contacts with the children.

Chai and Karen did not set a specific target to be achieved in the first session. Although Chai's had her hypotheses, she tried not to be overly dominated by these assumptions. She thought she would never find the answer in a short period of time and to her, it was more important to follow the flow of the conversation and to learn what was more important to the family. She encouraged interaction between the parents and the children because she believes direct communication is important. Karen had similar thought that the main purpose of the first session is to articulate the family's expectation and their commitments to work together with social worker. For her, the suitable term to describe this process is "Focus Check". She firmly believed that it was important for the family to experience feelings of workable and comfortable at the end of the first session.

It is quite clear that in the first session, Chai and Karen focus on the dynamic of the family structure before making any assumption. They try to interact with the dynamic of the family system in a flexible way and encourage responses from the system. This helps them understand the family structure better. They are opened for many suitable strategies in helping the family along the sessions.

IN BETWEEN THE SESSIONS

Tasks are mostly given to the family in hoping that they have something to do in between the sessions. Chai and Karen admitted that not all the families were given tasks at the end of the first session. But, Karen personally preferred to use tasks because she admitted at the beginning of the interview that:

"my personal style is to hopefully at some sessions always end with homework"

Both of them agreed that the use of tasks mainly based on the needs of the families. Certainly the instruction of giving task is not like the usual way we known in school context where teachers assign homework to their students.

Most of the times, the nature of the task is for parents to observe their children's conducts and make a brief verbal report in the following session. The instruction of the task is delivered in a soft and polite manner. For instance, Karen asked the parent:

"May be... mother you want to help me to observe... you know what are the things that he has done well and what are the things he has not done well..."

Based on Chai and Karen's experiences, most of the families members especially parents would complete the given task and bring it to discuss in the following session. However, some parents and teenagers were reluctant to this kind of activity. For Chai, designing an interesting and exciting task to attract the teenagers to participate was the main challenge. Conversely, for Karen, knowing the reluctant of certain family members about the given task reflected the family structure.

According to Karen, task may not be necessary given at the end of the session, she sometime would assign task spontaneously during the session. For instance, she actually asked *"Show me how you all talk at home."* This task allows the family enact in front of her. In general, there is no any concrete or prescript way of giving tasks. The task is mostly determined by the needs of the family and the progress of the sessions.

INTERVENTION

Intervention starts when family members interact with each other in the session. Talking including introduce oneself can be a starting point of intervention. Karen said:

"I think intervention also start right from the beginning when I first brought them in. And then I start talking with them along the way that means the intervention."

This is well explained in systemic thinking and non-linear change concept where if there is a little small change or new thing comes into the system, it will latter cause rapid change in the whole system (Jenkin, 1989; Warren, Franklin, & Streeter, 1998). Thus, Chai was very worried about her admin staff in answering phone calls from the potential clients because that was the beginning of an intervention. She even warned her staff that:

"...you don't do any intervention don't give advice don't tell the parent what to do."

TERMINATION

Both Chai and Karen had family cases terminated shortly after one session or prolonged to many unfinished years. Among the one-session cases, the families especially the parents were able to cope with their problems without further psychological assistance. Conversely, among those prolonged cases, it happened to the families with chronic crisis along the developmental stages. In addition, the agency (family service centre) was perceived by the families as the only reliable resource for them.

However, a therapeutic session is commonly terminated after three sessions based on a review. According to Karen, it was normal for a family who first come for help and asks:

"So how long can we see changes?"; "How soon can we see changes?"; "How often do we have to come here?"

Therefore, for Karen, she mostly discussed the termination with the family at the first session in order to give some assurances and sense of expectation for the family. This is a most appropriate act because a good family therapy normally is a quick one and is not about holding the clients for a long period of time (Fraenkel, 2005).

CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES IN SERVICES

Chai and Karen shared some of their experiences on working with families from different ethnicities especially Malay and Indian families. After a long discussion and detail analysis, three main cross-culture issues can be identified from both interviews. These issues are ethnic belief, patriarchal family system, and the language barrier.

Ethnic Belief

Chai highlighted some issues on working with Malay families. She thought that Malay families normally had many children and did not quite emphasize on their children's education. This cultural based of self determination could be a challenge for family therapist in conducting the session. As commented by Chai:

"I also cannot enforce my belief in on them. So I could only at most to find all the financial assistance you know supplements them but I cannot change to the very nature that organizes why they have certain problems..."

Patriarchic Family System

Both of them had issues on working with the Indian men especially the husbands. However, the dimension of the issue is slightly different for Chai as compared to Karen. Chai shared that she had problem to gain respect and participation from the Indian husbands. She commented that:

"... but with the Indian is a bit different it could be a cultural thing because I am a female. So there is a ...even if I do home visit I know that they know that I'm in but they won't care to even say Hello."

Karen highlighted that she did not have much opportunity to work with the Indian husbands. Anyhow, she had some challenges in working with them. She said:

"And then the Indian fathers those that I encountered with are those who are very fierce very hands off. And certain elements of temper and violence"

Karen commented that in all cultures, the husbands should always be respected. Working with the family shall begin with appreciating and reaffirming the husband if he were attending the session. However, she did not see the absence of the husband in the session as a problem because this reflected the dynamic of the family. Indeed, she considered this was a gender issue and she said,

"Because I also mindful if the husband here and got a wife here, I am a female here would the husband see I am align with the wife, you see. So I have to be mindful how can also giving airtime to the husband allow the husband to have fair share in what he has to say"

Language Barrier

Family therapists may be required to have various language skills to interact with the families from different ethnic groups. Chai and Karen are bilingual and local Singaporeans. As both of them can speak Mandarin and other dialects, they would not have language barrier with Chinese families. Still, both of them wished to master the Malay language in order to work more efficiently with the Malay families. For Malay and Indian parents who are not highly educated, speaking their languages in the session will be more helpful.

TECHNIQUES AND ORIENTATIONS IN FAMILY THERAPY

After investigating their experiences in conducting the sessions, I managed to interview them in more details about their favourite techniques and thinking in delivering family therapy.

Ms. Chai

When she was asked about the technique, she commented that:

"... if I were to really think about it. I think is my belief in the last I was created... I treasure everyone of my client. I think it has got to do I think ya it has got to do with my cases that died of me of course."

She experienced two tragic deaths of her clients which are not her fault. One was suicidal case even before she was able to see the client, while another one was died on road accident after several sessions. Surprisingly, she mentioned about the Carl Rogers which is not a proper model in family therapy. However, her intention was to highlight the concept of genuineness.

Later she also talked about the strength perspective and then ended up with full discussion on Systemic Theory. She described:

"... systemic theory is a bit different from system theory because... yes we are definitely mindful of the systems around them but we are equally mindful about the interacting effect on the person. Ya... so is all this lah. systemic effect that I was also looking at other than mindful of systems and how that make influence on person."

It is quite convincing that she is a very strong systemic believer. She used the word "co-evolvement" when referring to her favourite technique. The term "evolve" is also a term used by Nelson, Fleuridas and Rosenthal (1986) in describing systemic view of family. When I asked further about her favourite models that she has learned from the family therapy training, she then mentioned two models: Milan and Structural. Further than that, she told me about a super guru known as Karl Tomm. She said:

"Karl Tomm is one super super guru that talks about questioning skills. So he has developed that reflexive questioning beyond the circular questioning. Milan... is whether... developed into all this reflexive questioning and a lot of different kinds of questioning that help to elicit the

dynamics and I find that useful. Yah...so I always think that it is how we question that matters and is through the language lah. How we... how we... use language in the session to affect change which is again talking cure."

Hence, it is quite clear that her central belief of "talking cure" is actually influenced by the Milan approach in questioning skill. In more accurate term, it is the Post Milan approach led by Boscolo and Cecchin (Goldenberg, & Goldenberg, 2000). Her belief in "treasure every one of my clients" can be linked to the concepts of "Curiosity and Neutrality" in the Milan approach (Cecchin, 1987). This is because she would treasure every of her clients and formulate hypotheses prior to any session. As she had also stressed on Systemic Theory which reflecting the other name for Milan model, Milan or Post Milan School of Thought could be the central influence on her family therapy practice.

Ms. Karen

Regarding the technique, she highlighted several techniques from Strategic Model. She commented:

"To me it is the system something that I look at and work on. But in term of giving task and home work and also reframing... Yah. Come quite a fair bit from Strategic [Model]."

Examples on how she had given task to family have been mentioned in the previous section. Furthermore, she shared with me how she had given paradoxical message for a mother in coping with two young girls who refused to go to school. She recalled,

"Is purposely ask let say 'How long do you think your child actually cry during the period of time?'. So they said half an hour. I said 'Ok then during this half an hour it seems like your child needs that space to cry yah so once the child finish crying half an hour then you put the child back to bed and then during that course'... affirm the child let the child know something like that."

Her paradoxical technique was a success because the children went to school and the mother introduced her friends to see Karen. She admitted that she was relatively a directive person but surprisingly she found that linear questions were very useful in confronting the clients. Linear questions are part of the circular questions technique in Milan approach (Goldenberg, & Goldenberg, 2000). Linear questions are used to seek history or specific information such as age (Goldenberg, & Goldenberg, 2000). It is certainly not to be used to challenge client unless it is referred to "strategic questions" in Milan approach presented by Karl Tomm in 1988 (Brown, 1997). It has been understood that Strategic model and Milan models are closely related because the early development of Milan model was strongly influenced by Strategic techniques (Goldenberg, & Goldenberg, 2000; Nicols & Schwartz, 2000).

Karen highly valued the history of the family especially the children's behaviour but mostly she would just focus on here and now which is the current and immediate interaction of the family (Seaburn, Landu-Stanton, & Horwitz, 1987). She admitted that she had not tried the Bowenian and considered that was not her preference, although sometime she would form genogram in looking at the impact of the problem. Mostly she would focus on the nuclear system of the family.

Under the strategic influence, she would not try to focus all the problems faced by the family. She would ask the family to decide which problem is more important to be worked out. She would then work on the manageable thing first. Hopefully, if success she would then focus on other things. This could be viewed as a solution focused approach and the approach is mostly used in the school context (Toh, 2006). Under the latest trend of the Post-Modernism, beside the Strategic Model, Karen also thought about the other models especially Structural Model. For her, a successful paradoxical technique must be able to pace with the family system. Hearing, talking and understanding the structural pattern of the family interaction are important before any technique can be applied. Thus it is not surprise that she said, "Now... now... I think there are occasion instances with Strategic still and with Structural". It is quite clear that Strategic School of Thought is very dominant in Karen's practices on family therapy; however she did refer Structural model in helping her to deliver the session more effectively.

CONCLUSION

Both therapists apply loose and flexible approaches in preparing their sessions. Many similarities can be found between them in handling the first session, in between sessions and conducting the interventions. Although they have some slight different preferences on theoretical framework, systemic approach is the fundamental thought in their practices. In brief, Chai and Karen's practice in family therapy can be summarised in the following Table 1.

Chai and Karen have the common understanding on how the family therapy sessions should be conducted.

Chai is mostly informed by the Post Milan model under the influence of Karl Tomm, while Karen is a Strategic practitioner with successful experience in sending paradoxical messages. However, it is not possible that Chai and Karen might go for more integrated model in future as “integration is the future of family therapy” (Seaburn, Landu-Stanton, & Horwitz, 1987, p. 23). Both of them are pragmatic users and have creatively combined the essence of family therapy with the social work values and practice in providing clinical services to family. They have demonstrated what was claimed by Simon (2002, p. 43) that “The therapy of the coming century is likely to be even more pragmatic, integrative, and aggregative”.

Table 1 - Model(s) of Family Therapy in Practice

Sessions	Chai	Karen	Orientation	Chai	Karen
Pre-session	Loose and Flexible Hypotheses Not to know more	Loose and Flexible Hypotheses Not to know more	Theory	Systemic Roger Strength perspective	Systemic
First session	Family Structure , Talking Cure	Family Structure, Focus Check	Dominant Model	Milan (Post)	Strategic
In between session	Task Occasionally	Task Oriented	Other references	Structural Strategic for task Post Modernism	Structural Milan for linear question Post Modernism
Intervention	From the beginning	From the beginning	Techniques or Elements	Reflexive Question, Hypotheses, Curiosity, Neutrality	Task, Paradoxical, Linear Question Prescribe, Directive, Reframing
Termination	1 session to many years	1 session to many years			

REFERENCES

- Brown, J. (1997). Circular questioning: An introductory guide. *Australia New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 18(2), 109-114.
- Burck, C. (2005). Comparing qualitative research methodologies for systemic research: The use of grounded theory, discourse analysis and narrative analysis. *The Association for Family Therapy and Systemic Practice*, 27, 237-262.
- Cecchin, G. (1987). Hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality revisited: An invitation to curiosity. *Family Process*, 25(4), 405-413.
- Fraenkel, P. (2005). Whatever happened to family therapy? *Psychotherapy Networker*, 29(3), 30-39.
- Goldenberg, I., & Goldenberg, H. (2000). *Family therapy: An overview* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Jenkins, H. (1989). The family and loss: A systems framework. *Palliative Medicine*, 3, 97-104.
- Nelson, T.S., Fleuridas, C., & Rosenthal, D. M. (1986). The evolution of circular questions; Training family therapists. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 12(2), 113-127.
- Nicols, M. P., & Schwartz, R. C. (2000). *Family therapy: Concept and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Palmer, S. (1999). In search of effective counselling across cultures. In S. Palmer, & P. Laungani (Eds.), *Counselling in a multicultural society* (153-173). London, England: Sage.
- Seaburn, D., Landau-Stanton, J., & Horwitz, S. (1987). Core techniques in family therapy. In *Handbook of family therapy* (5-23). New York, NY: Brunner-Routledge.
- Simon, R. (2002). The larger story. *Psychotherapy Networker*, 26(3), 36-45.
- Stanton, M.D., & Heath, A.W. (1995). Family treatment of alcohol and drug abuse. In R. H. Mikesell, D.D.

- Lusterman, & S. H. McDaniel (Eds.), *Integrating family therapy: Handbook of Family Psychotherapy and Systems Theory* (529-541). Washington, DC: APA.
- Tan, A. (2003). The emergence of family therapy in postmodern Singapore. In K.S. Ng (Ed.), *Global perspectives in family therapy* (39-55). New York, NY: Brunner- Routledge.
- Toh, J. (2006). Family therapy modalities in Singapore: Pure type or "Rojak" In A. Yeo (Ed.), *Labyrinth of therapeutic encounters* (169-177). Singapore: Armour Publication.
- Warren, K., Franklin, C., & Streeter, C. L. (1998). New directions in system theory: Chaos and complexity, *Social Work*, 43(4), 357-372.
- Wong Oi Kau Stephanie (1994). I don't want to be crazy: Use of Solution Focused Therapy in working with a woman with depression. In N. Rhind (Ed.), *Empowering families: A collection of concepts and methods* (100-118). Hong Kong, China: Hong Kong Family Welfare Society.